

How Greek was Paul's Eschatology?

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Introduction

Constraints of space dictate a brief summary of complex issues. We must avoid the Hegelian polarizations which played out a zero-sum game between 'Judaism' and 'Hellenism' either as historical descriptions or as *a priori* theological evaluations. All second-temple Judaism is, in some sense, *hellenistic* Judaism. Even when Jewish writers extol the Jewish God and the Jewish way of life, they can use Stoic or Platonic themes, as in Wisdom of Solomon and 4 Maccabees. We must recognise, too, the distinction between *derivation* and *confrontation*. To echo a motif is neither to endorse it nor to indicate genealogical descent. Paul 'takes every thought captive to obey the Messiah' (2 Cor. 10.5). He borrows ideas from non-Jewish culture, but the power behind his own beliefs remains a *narrative*: Israel's God had fulfilled his promises in Messiah and Spirit, generating (not an isolated community with new, 'pure' ideas, but) a messianic worldview rooted in ancient Jewish ideas and engaged with the wider culture.

1. The Place of Eschatology

The question of ultimate futures, for the world of human beings, is far more prominent in Jewish writings than non-Jewish. There are indeed the 'golden age' theories, whether driven by cosmic speculation or, as with Virgil or Horace, political expediency. From Homer to Plato there are theories about life after death; among the Stoics, visions of cosmic conflagration and rebirth. But these occupy a tiny proportion of the literature compared to eschatology in second-temple Jewish writings. The word *elpis* in ancient Greek is not particularly prominent, often merely implying wishful thinking, a cousin of *tychē*, 'fate'. To express a good, secure hope (as in Socrates's dying words) requires a further adjective, perhaps *agathē* or *megalē*. Hope may have been the last thing left in Pandora's box, but it was a generalized optimism, not a specific, defined or well grounded expectation.

The prominence of Jewish eschatology may reflect political circumstances. The persecuted and oppressed long for radical change. But the hope then articulated drew upon the character of Israel's God, specifically as creator and judge. The God who had made the world would put it right. The paradigm was the Exodus, as in Wisdom 10—19. Retellings of that foundational story sustained this double belief and gave it political and also philosophical targets: the Epicureans in Wisdom 1—5, the pagan rulers later on. The Jewish hope for 'the age to come' could be variously expressed, but it rested on Jewish-style creational monotheism, coupled with Israel's election. Israel's God, the creator, would act at last, in a new Exodus, a new victory, a new creation.

2. Paul: New Creation

I have argued elsewhere that Paul retrieved and transformed the ancient Jewish eschatology around his belief that the creator God had *inaugurated* the new age through the messianic events concerning Jesus and the Spirit.

The climax of Romans 1—8 is the often marginalized passage 8.18–25, expressing the rebirth of creation. Any potential analogy with the Stoic conflagration and cosmic rebirth is superficial and problematic. These verses pick up four earlier strands: Adam, Abraham, the Exodus and the Messiah. The ‘glorification’ of human beings in 8.21 and 8.30 is the reversal of the Adamic loss of glory in 3.23, which looks back to chapter 1 (humans turn away from divine power seen in creation). Abraham, in Romans 4, reverses this by giving God glory and trusting his power, so that he will inherit, not the ‘land’ only, but the whole *kosmos* (4.13). As in Genesis 15, this is accomplished through the new Exodus: in Romans 6, the slaves are set free by coming through the water; in Romans 7 they arrive at Sinai with all its puzzles; then in chapter 8, heaping up the Exodus-imagery, the Spirit dwells in them, like the pillar of cloud and fire, to lead them to their ‘inheritance’ – not the holy land, certainly not ‘heaven’, but the renewed creation.

This ‘inheritance’ is won by the Messiah. Paul expounds Psalms 2 and 8, joining together the worldwide Davidic extension of the Abrahamic ‘inheritance’ and the ‘glory’ of the image-bearing humans. The passage invokes the so-called ‘messianic woes’, frequent in Jewish speculations about the coming end. However much Paul (intentionally or otherwise) echoes non-Jewish parallels, Romans 8 retells Israel’s eschatological narrative, reworked around Messiah and Spirit.

The other obvious ‘new creation’ passage is 1 Corinthians 15.20–28. Again, Paul’s language resonates with themes from the wider hellenistic world, but his underlying argument expounds a biblical and second-temple theme: the victory of the creator God over the powers, including death itself. The whole chapter is soaked in Genesis 1, 2 and 3: Paul’s theme is the rescue of creation from corruption – the antithesis of Platonic eschatology. The argument is again made through messianic Psalms, in this case 8 and 110: all things are ‘put under his feet’. All creation is subject to the Messiah, the true Adam. Verse 24 may also allude to Daniel 2.44, evoking the wider theme of successive world-empires, fused with the Israelite belief in the kingdom of God. The victory of verses 24–28 is echoed at the end, where Death, Sin and the Law are overcome (vv. 54–57). In this chapter we have, not the messianic woes, but the messianic battle, another important Jewish theme.

In several passages, Paul retrieves the Jewish notion of the strange, dark national story reaching a sudden and unexpected conclusion: ‘when the time had fully come’, God sent forth his son (Gal. 4.4). Paul must have known the Roman parallel: Virgil, Horace, Ovid and Livy tell the politically powerful narrative of Rome’s history reaching its surprising climax in Augustus, son of God, lord of the world. Virgil did not get this from the parallel Jewish sources, nor did Paul get it from Virgil. Here is an accidental but sharp confrontation, indeed contradiction.

The sign of this contradiction is the resurrection, foundational to Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 15. This is the second main theme of Paul’s eschatology.

3. Paul: Resurrection

When Paul spoke of the resurrection of those *en Christō*, he drew on ancient Jewish sources, sharpening up their message. Despite the distant parallels with the Alcestis legend and the like, the obvious pre-Christian evidence for resurrection belief is Jewish. But Paul's view is not simply derived from such strands. It has reshaped them in (at least) seven ways.

First, like eschatology itself, resurrection has moved from the periphery to the centre. It is not a central topic in Jewish writings. But in Paul it is.

Second, for Paul the event of 'resurrection' has split into two. It is no longer a single event for all God's people at the end. The Messiah is first; his people come later.

Third, it involves neither a resuscitation of identical bodies, as in 2 Maccabees, nor a kind of angelic body, as in 2 Baruch, but a *transformed physicality*. It is still a body, but has different properties. It is animated by the Spirit. (The famous *sōma pneumatikon* is a way of referring, not to the *composition* of the body but to its *animating principle*. When Aristotle speaks of wombs 'swollen with air', he calls them *hysterai pneumatikai*; when Vitruvius speaks of a machine that is 'moved by the wind' he calls it a *pneumatikon organon*. The womb, and the machine, are not *made of pneuma*; they are filled with it or driven by it.)

Fourth, the Messiah himself has been raised. This is new. No writings prior to Paul envisaged the Messiah dying. Nor, therefore, do they imagine him being raised. This is a clue to early Christian exegesis, as of 2 Samuel 7.12. No Jews prior to Paul had read that text as a prophecy of the resurrection of David's son, but the Hebrew *vehaqimothi eth-zar'a* was rendered by the LXX as *kai anastēsō to sperma sou*. The early Christians exploited that opportunity.

Fifth, Paul uses the future resurrection within an ethical argument. Resurrection provokes a re-evaluation of present bodily behaviour. 'God raised the Lord and will raise us by his power . . . therefore glorify God in your body' (1 Cor. 6.14, 20).

Sixth, though resurrection was already a metaphor in Ezekiel 37, in Paul it acquires new metaphorical use. It signals what happens in baptism; and it is also used as a metaphor for Jewish restoration to faith in Romans 11.15.

Seventh, Paul describes what one colleague has called 'collaborative eschatology'. For Paul, the present work of the church is already part of the new world, and hence is 'not in vain'.

This brief summary highlights the fact that in Paul's view of future resurrection we are dealing (a) with a thoroughly *Jewish* view, unknown in the non-Jewish world except in rare poetical imagination, and (b) with a Jewish view *thoroughly reworked around the Messiah*.

What about 2 Corinthians 4 and 5? Despite many proposals, I believe Paul has not swapped his Jewish view of resurrection for Platonic theory. He uses the metaphor of the 'tent', cognate with

his regular Jewish image of the believer as the temple of the Spirit. And his promise, as in 1 Cor. 15.53f., is that the future body, at present kept safe in the heavens where future purposes are in store, will be an immortal physicality, put on over the present mortal one. This is the 'eternal' state, at present unseen, to which he refers in 4.16–18. The language of Greek philosophy is here employed in order to contest its normal conclusions.

4. Paul: the Parousia

Paul's vision of the 'second coming' of Jesus is modelled on, and again transforms, a Jewish theme: the return of YHWH to Zion. The notion of 'eschatological delay' was frequent in the pre-Christian Jewish world long before it reappeared in 2 Peter 3. For Paul, as for the gospel writers, the 'return' has happened in the person and accomplishment of Jesus – and now the 'day of YHWH' has become 'the day of the Lord'. There is nothing like this in the Greek world. The Greeks did not tell a story about a god who had abandoned his people to exile but who would one day return in triumph.

Nevertheless, one of the famous words here is almost unknown in the LXX: *parousia*. (The five LXX uses are theologically innocuous, referring to the arrival or presence of a person or group; compare e.g. 1 Cor. 16.17; Phil. 1.26, etc.) In wider hellenistic culture, *parousia* had the more specific meanings of (a) the arrival or presence of Caesar or some other high official, and (b) the appearance or manifestation of a deity. For Paul, it had both these connotations. When Jesus 'appeared' once more, this would be the arrival of the world's true Lord, the *kyrios* of the LXX. These are basically *Jewish* themes clothed in specifically *Greek* dress, stressing that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not.

Conclusion

So to a brief conclusion. The central strands of Paul's eschatology exhibit an underlying Jewish *narrative* which, with one important exception, has no parallel in the Greek world. This is the narrative of creation and covenant, of Adam, Abraham, Exodus and Messiah, reshaped around Jesus and the Spirit. But that reshaping highlighted the scriptural theme, that Israel's coming king would be the lord, not of Israel only, but of the whole world. Paul was not constructing a private worldview away from wider culture and philosophy. The evidences of Greek ideas in his writings, including his eschatology, are signs, not that he was borrowing bits and pieces to stitch together a theological patchwork quilt, but that he was expressing his messianically reshaped Jewish narrative in such a way as to take every thought captive to obey the Messiah.

The one important exception shows that this was no mere intellectual or abstract philosophical exercise. Paul's eschatology entailed the confrontation between the fulfilled time of the gospel of Jesus and the fulfilled time of the gospel of Caesar.